

The “Crossing Borders” Program:
Increasing Intercultural Competency Via Structured Social Interactions

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Abstract

Increasing diversity in American college classrooms and recent trends toward globalization require professors to teach more creatively in order to encourage students' face-to-face intercultural interactions and resulting competencies. At a commuter campus with a heterogeneous student population, a series of large-group activities and small-group dialogues between American and international students resulted in satisfaction and growth for a majority of American participants. Areas of self-reported growth primarily involved intercultural competencies, including knowledge of, attitudes toward, and skills when interacting with others from different cultures.

The “Crossing Borders” Program:

Increasing Intercultural Competency Via Structured Intercultural Social Interactions

In 2009-2010 approximately 700,000 international students (3.5% of the enrollment) studied at American higher education institutions (Institute of International Education, 2010), contributing \$18 billion to the U.S. economy (Institute of International Education, 2011; NAFSA, 2011). At the same time, nearly a quarter million Americans studied abroad (Institute of International Education, 2011). Sojourning students are big business, with recently expanding numbers.

Globalization is sometimes defined geographically, where the current focus is on issues shared across countries, emphasizing the interconnectedness of different peoples (Beerkens, 2003). The changing landscape presented by globalization requires educators to teach more creatively in order to foster globally-minded students. In my experience, students often report that they would like to talk to people from other cultures but are not sure how to get started doing so. The purpose of this qualitative research was to evaluate a project called “Crossing Borders” for a Psychology Across Cultures class. Crossing Borders aims to increase students’ intercultural competence through small-group and large group interactions, combining American and international students for semi-structured social events and intercultural dialogues. In this article, I will offer, through example, some ways to encourage intercultural interactions and subsequent competencies for students, including the benefits and difficulties of implementing such programs.

As globalization increases, technologies like Skype, mobile phones, and Internet are rapidly connecting a shrinking world. In nations as ethnically diverse and technologically

advanced as the U. S., the 21st century reality is that students need to become more adept in working with people from other cultures. To help students develop a global perspective, I believe it is imperative that educators help them understand culture's influence on themselves and others so they can interact in intercultural settings. Intercultural competence does not only mean having students *know* about cultures; it also means they improve their *attitudes* towards and effective and appropriate *interactions* with others (Deardorff, 2006). Kolb's (1984) model of experiential education similarly emphasizes doing, feeling, and reflecting—not just conceptualizing—to generate deeper student learning.

Psychology educators can help prepare students for having relationships in a global landscape, yet there are huge challenges in higher education to improving such competencies. Additionally, white Americans often have difficulty describing their cultural (Gloria, Rieckman, & Rush, 2000), racial (Helms, 1993; Rowe, Bennett, & Atkinson, 1994), and ethnic (e.g., Phinney, 1989) identities. Technology-dependent Whites are the statistical majority in America, and in some areas (e.g., the commuter campus where I teach) many white Americans do not regularly converse with cultural or ethnic minority individuals. I usually have few non-White students in my 12-40 person classes. Like 49% of Miami Middletown students, many learners in my classes are age 23 or older. Very few of my students have ever left the United States. Each semester, roughly a quarter of them claim they never thought about what it means to be White or American. Thus, teaching American students today about intercultural competence can mean helping them see and interpret their *own* ethnic, cultural, and national identities before challenging them to meet and appropriately interact with people from *other* cultures.

The goals of the Psychology Across Cultures course include increased understanding of global issues and of oneself as a global citizen. To cultivate intercultural competence through

interactive activities and reflection (Gloria et al., 2000), I designed a project to increase my students' intercultural exposure. I sponsored semi-structured social activities and dialogues with international students, something almost none of my students had experienced. I employed Allport's (1954) contact hypothesis, which suggests that intergroup contact helps people reduce prejudice. A recent meta-analysis showed that to diminish prejudice, anxiety reduction and increasing empathy are more important than knowledge about another group (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008).

I employed a multiple case study design for this project with Case 1 using qualitative data: narrative review of students' reflection papers, and Case 2, based on intercultural competence experts' suggestions (Deardorff, 2006), involved both qualitative (narrative review) and quantitative (student satisfaction ratings) data. Both cases addressed two research questions: Can short-term programming focusing on intercultural dialogues result in student satisfaction and growth, and can it increase students' intercultural competencies (knowledge, skills, and attitudes)?

Method

Participants

In Case 1, 13 students (7 women, 6 men) participated in the inaugural section of Psychology Across Cultures at Miami Middletown. The students were Caucasian American (11), African-American (1), and White international (1). Case 2 involved 11 students (9 women, 2 men), with 9 Caucasian Americans, 1 African-American, and 1 Latina immigrant.

Crossing Borders Events

In Case 1, students participated in two, 1-2 hour dialogues and wrote a reflection paper about their discussions, observations, and experiences. For each dialogue, an English as a Second

Language instructor and I paired two psychology students with 2-3 Chinese international students from Miami's main campus (Oxford), who participated in this study as an English composition class requirement. Each group arranged meetings independently of the other groups. For the first event, we instructed students simply to get acquainted. However, we reasoned that discussion prompts or a guided conversation topic could be helpful if students were shy or unsure how to get started with "small talk." Thus, in the first meeting, they we provided prompts to watch and discuss video clips about stereotypes from American musicals (*West Side Story*, *Grease*, and *South Pacific*). We told students that the discussion prompts were guides and not requirements. When many of them found that the Asian students did not understand the videos, nor the terms "stereotypes" and "prejudice," and most groups focused solely on getting acquainted. Collectively, psychology students indicated that international students asked them few questions. Americans wondered whether the Asians' hesitancy could be due to introversion more typically seen in collectivistic cultures (Hofstede & McCrae, 2004), lack of language confidence, or disinterest in the project. Thus, for their second meeting, they proposed that if they gave discussion questions beforehand, the international students (if they were shy or nervous) may have more time to prepare responses. Thus, with our permission, the Americans developed as their discussion prompts a 30-question list of things for the international students about which they were curious, which they then distributed before the second meeting. The international students, in turn, created their own list of 30 curiosity questions for the Americans. The questions American and Asian students generated for each other ranged widely, including politics, China's one-child policy, dating and marriage practices, holidays, parent/child relationships, difficulties changing cultures, and popular culture.

In Case 2, students participated in two, 3-5 hour “Crossing Borders” events and wrote a paper as described above. Given previous scheduling difficulties with independent small groups, we opted to try large group events for which we arranged transportation and neutral settings not at either campus (giving no one “home turf”). These events included a “Fiddler on the Roof” play performance and an American-style potluck dinner, where Asian international students cooked and Americans brought prepared dishes. After the main event, they formed 4-5 person discussion groups including American and international (Chinese or Korean) students. Again we gave students discussion prompts, this time about cultural values and food, and we instructed them to use the prompts if they found them helpful or to disregard the prompts if they felt comfortable guiding the conversations themselves.

Procedure and Measures

For both case studies, I reviewed psychology students’ reflection papers to extract common themes (see Table 1). In Case 2, I also created a brief survey measuring overall satisfaction with Crossing Borders events on a scale from 1-5, where 1 = Very Dissatisfied and 5 = Very Satisfied. Students also rated eight questions from 1-5 addressing the impact of the events on various aspects of their personal and professional development, where 1 = Negative Impact and 5 = Great Impact (see Table 2).

Results and Discussion

Students generally enjoyed the Crossing Borders events (see Table 1 and Appendix). In the survey in Case 2, 90% of respondents indicated overall satisfaction with Fiddler on the Roof play and discussion, and 100% indicated overall satisfaction with the potluck dinner. For personal development items, 50-100% of students indicated positive impacts (see Table 2). More specifically, and most important in regard to globalization, students increased in intercultural

competence in terms of knowledge of, attitudes toward, and skills when interacting with others. After Crossing Borders, students described increases in five types of knowledge, two skills, and three attitudes (see Table 1 for summary and Appendix for narrative examples). Most frequently, students indicated they learned about specific cultural practices, such as parenting strategies, marriage expectations, and holidays. Other common themes were increased tolerance for language and communication difficulties, observation of more similarities than differences across the cultural groups, understanding about cultural adjustment issues, increased self-awareness, and reduced nervousness during intercultural interactions.

Overall, repeated exposure to culturally-different others through Crossing Borders benefitted psychology students. Crossing Borders tested Allport's (1954) contact hypothesis and seems to have reduced some stereotypes the American students held about Asians. In other words, they saw universalism more clearly: People share the same goals and desires, even as culture dictates the ways that people these objectives are achieved (Berry, Poortinga, Breugelmans, Chasiotis, & Sam, 2011).

Even with its successes, the program had its logistical challenges and awkward moments. For example, the American students often said they felt like they did most of the leading in getting groups together. To help with initial contact, the other instructor and I set joint deadlines not only for when their papers were due but for when they should first make contact and when they should hold their first meeting. Although American students learned during both small-group and large-group events, trade-offs existed for these approaches. In small groups students challenged the "lack of organization" and scheduling difficulties, and they sometimes required intervention from instructors to help finalize meeting arrangements. Thus, we helped to encourage (or require) responses from students who were not initially reacting to other students'

e-mail, phone, or Facebook requests to meet. Because the international students did not have cars, the burden of commuting to all of the meetings on the other campus fell upon the Americans students. Nonetheless, in small groups the American students reported gaining more specific knowledge about other cultures, had more opportunities to observe verbal and nonverbal behavior, and had more experiences tolerating language miscommunications (translation difficulties) and people speaking other languages in front of them. In contrast, large group gatherings gave them more comfort, fewer scheduling difficulties, more chances to observe large-group behavior, and more chances to try new things (a play and new foods).

However, in large groups Americans and international students tended to gravitate and segregate more into cultural in-groups and out-groups, which took more active intervention from the instructors to get students from both countries to mingle and converse. In subsequent iterations of the program, we helped to prevent the clustering by pairing American and international students for an initial “getting acquainted” conversation in person, on Skype, or on instant messaging before we engaged them in large-group events. Many students noted the technology options helped with initial nervousness (Amichai-Hamburger & McKenna, 2006) and with scheduling difficulties due to being at two different campuses.

In both large- and small-group events, Americans noted a proclivity toward shyness among the Asian students. Some Americans said that this made them feel more like reporters than acquaintances, and they wished that the international students expressed more motivation to gain information from them, too. Although international students’ comments were not available for this study, future research could help determine whether they also interpreted these exchanges as helpful.

In summary, despite its challenges, the Crossing Borders program and others like it offer enough structure for students to be moderately comfortable, yet enough leeway to allow students opportunities to be independent and to take risks (and perhaps fail) in order to grow as intercultural communicators. Dialogues with individuals from other cultures prepare psychology students for the more complex global interactions that are becoming the norm in the 21st-century.

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Table 1. *Themes Addressed in Students' "Crossing Borders" Reflection Papers*

	Case 1 – Small Group Events				Case 2 – Large Group Events			
	Teacher-Guided Discussion Prompts		Class-Created Discussion Prompts		Fiddler on the Roof		American-Style Potluck Dinner	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
KNOWLEDGE (cognitive)								
1) Various cultural-specific topics (e.g., one-child policy, marriage, holidays, food, parenting, etc.)	12	92	11	100	11	100	9	90
2) Cultural adjustment difficulties	7	54	3	27	5	45	4	40
3) Observation of verbal and nonverbal behaviors (e.g., indirect communication style, covering mouth when nervous)	6	46	4	36	7	64	7	70
4) Familial piety/pressure to succeed	5	38	3	27	2	18	0	0
5) Difficulty making friends, approaching an out-group	5	38	1	09	4	40	8	80
SKILL (behavioral)								
1) Tolerating language miscommunications & others speaking a different language in front of them	5	38	6	55	4	36	0	0
2) New skills (conversation, using chopsticks, trying new foods, etc.)	2	15	4	36	3	27	3	30
ATTITUDE (affective)								
1) See more similarities than differences	8	62	9	82	2	18	5	50
2) Increased self-awareness	4	31	4	36	8	73	5	50
3) Reduction of nervousness	3	23	5	45	3	27	8	80
OUTCOME								
4) Student expressed satisfaction	10	77	7	64	11	100	8	80
5) Student expressed personal & professional growth	11	85	5	45	9	82	5	50
<i>N</i>	13	--	11	--	11	--	10	--

Note. Numbers indicate how many students in the class addressed a particular theme in their narrative responses. For Case 1, $N = 13$ ($n = 11$ in event 2). For Case 2, $N = 11$ ($n = 10$ in event 2). Student occasionally missed a Crossing Borders event due to scheduling conflicts.

Table 2. *Case 2 Student Self-Reported Impact Ratings for Crossing Borders Program*

	Fiddler on the Roof ^a			Potluck Dinner ^b		
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Range	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Range
Awareness of international students' issues during cultural adjustment	4.0	0.7	3-5	3.6	0.7	3-5
Ability/comfort to interact with people from other cultures	4.3	0.5	3-5	4.5	0.5	4-5
Understanding of other cultures' beliefs & behaviors	4.6	0.5	4-5	4.4	0.5	4-5
Understanding of your own cultural context (beliefs, behaviors, etc.)	4.2	0.6	3-5	4.0	0.8	3-5
Feelings about people from other cultures	4.6	0.5	3-5	4.1	0.6	3-5
Personal development	4.3	0.8	3-5	4.4	0.5	4-5
Professional development	4.0	0.8	3-5	3.8	0.9	3-5
Critical thinking skills (looking at complex issues from various perspectives)	4.2	0.6	3-5	4.1	0.8	3-5

Note. ^a*n* = 10. ^b*n* = 8. 1 = Negative impact, 3 = No impact, and 5 = Great impact.

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Appendix

Examples of Narrative Student Comments Regarding Intercultural Competencies

Knowledge

- 1) *Specific cultural values or practices*: "I really enjoyed the assignment because it gave me an opportunity to apply some of the things we have been discussing in class to real life interactions. I was surprised to realize there were more differences in parenting styles between urban and rural areas rather than nationality. In some ways my parents are more conservative than E.'s parents. Both American and Chinese parenting styles differ from person to person and area to area...without this project I would not have been able to see the impact of our class discussions on my perspective and outlook on life in the U.S. and my role as an agent of change and integration."
- 2) *Cultural adjustment issues*: "I was surprised at A.'s comfort level but realized that three years in the U.S. would probably result in just about anyone being comfortable with their cultural surroundings. V. did fit the Chinese student profile, as she was quiet and reserved, letting A. do most of the talking. Finally from this experience, I learned that the Chinese want to be more Westernized, at least those living here do. I find this interesting because as an American, I really want to more 'Easternized.' I view the Chinese from this experience as living a simpler life materialistically, as being more selfless and putting their family before their own individual needs, and has hard-working. These are all ideas that I strive for myself but at the same time still value my American traditions. It seems we both want some of what the other has experienced while still holding on to the parts of our culture that we cherish."
- 3) *Verbal and nonverbal behaviors*: "I noticed that W. was very confident in every area except understanding the American language. E. was very nervous and really never spoke unless we asked her a question. I realized that her behavior was very relevant to her cultural upbringing. E. also laughed a lot and smiled. I remembered in one of the articles we read that [people often use] laughing and smiling a lot [with] nervousness...W. took the lead in every question, unless the question was solely directed to E. In my observation from conducting the meeting with the two, I would have concluded that E. was following the customs of her culture by allowing W. to arrange the meeting, do all the communicating before the event, and then conducting all the questioning during the meeting. Truly this was a drastic difference from our American culture..."
- 4) *Familial piety/pressure to succeed*: "I had had a political course about China for my senior capstone, and we read many books about China, but none of them gave me anything close to the same experience as I had meeting N. & Y....A very interesting thing that we talked about in class and came up in our discussion was the familial duty that a child has to the parents and family. Both N. & Y. chose their majors because it was something that their parents wanted them to do...this put [my American partner] & I in a very tough place because on one hand, our culture would be more apt to follow what our desires tell us, while Chinese culture is more fixated on what the parents think is best. I did not know what may be the appropriate answer, so I attempted to compromise between the two and suggested a marketing degree, which is financially successful, similar to a business degree, and more artistic and creative."

- 5) *Difficulty making friends*: "V. loves cooking while A. is into art and photography, and both agree they love shopping. When we think just about these things they like to do, why is it hard for their American peers to approach them when there are plenty of students who may share interest in these things? It is far too often that I hear Americans say those who come to the U.S. need to learn our language and our culture. This is an implication that they will be left behind if not or suffer from harsh social profiling. The issue is not entirely on them, though. It is on *us*. We forget that our responsibility should be to meet them halfway and show hospitality. A representation of our country is made through their first encounters with the American social spectrum..."

Skills

- 6) *Conversation skills*: "This experience was very enlightening. It challenged me to interact with individuals unlike myself and encourage them to share their stories and insights. I typically do not start a conversation, and in this situation, I had no choice. I hope that in the future meeting, we can interact with them in a more social environment, like a restaurant, that will allow us to develop a more detailed understanding of their culture and values, potentially developing a relationship outside of the Crossing Borders experiment and maintaining contact throughout our education, helping all of us grow as individuals."
- 7) *Working through language miscommunications*: "I now realize we were asking the wrong questions. Instead of asking what they *thought* of this or that culture, we should have asked them to *describe* this or that culture. Indeed, since their culture makes them agreeable, they would not express opinions that could offend people; they would instead give a broad generic answer. I now realize that our efforts were counterproductive because we worked against Chinese's social conventions instead of with them."

Attitudes

- 8) *Increased self-awareness*: "It was interesting to me to learn that I am not always as open minded as I think I am. Letting go of my own core values is something that I am not able to do yet, even for the purposes of conversation. This is something that I will reflect about within myself for some time, and I am thankful that this opportunity shined a light here....I now realize that, as much as I am receptive to different approaches and system of values, there are some basic things I just cannot give up, even for a moment, because they are core values that define me...No matter how hard I try to use a cultural lens to appreciate other people's point of view, I will never be able to fully let go of my own values."
- 9) *Reduction of nervousness*: "I felt great in how our meeting took shape. For me, it began as something uncomfortable and ended as being an eye-opening experience... In order for me to gain true understanding of how a different culture believes and thinks, I must interact with individuals from that culture....I look especially forward to going into our final meeting with a greater understanding of class material so that I may take the information I have gained from class and apply it (or see if it applies) to a real life interaction. The Chinese students...were very outgoing and forced my apprehension aside."

- 10) *More similarities than differences*: “Although the cultural aspects of this project were interesting and crucial for the true understanding of other cultures, the most valuable thing I will take away from this experience is that people are people. Remove the cultural differences, wash away the money, and people have inherently the same physiological and psychological needs. There is a common psychological basis that underlies differences in readily apparent characteristic pattern behaviors of individuals. [Crossing Borders has taught me] sometimes it is necessary to experience something again to remind us of things we already know.”